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Libraries as Wellbeing Supportive Spaces in Contemporary Schools

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ABSTRACT

Schools are increasingly concerned with the promotion of student wellbeing, and relatively little is known about school libraries as wellbeing supportive spaces in contemporary schools. This article draws on qualitative interview data from students and library managers to explore how students make use of the school library, and how this relates to the library as a safe space. It finds that school libraries can be highly valued for their capacity to foster belonging and sanctuary and allow exposure to books and opportunities for reading. Students also appreciated how libraries provided a space for relaxing and recharging, supporting lively and social activities as well as quietude. There was recognition of the role of supportive library staff, who created inviting and supportive environments with careful selection of furnishings and decorations.

KEYWORDS

School library; school librarian; teacher librarian; wellbeing; well-being; safe space

Introduction

Concerns about student wellbeing are on the rise and may be compounded by the ongoing diverse challenges students face in current times, with the COVID-19 pandemic influencing student wellbeing (Patrick et al., 2020). Across international studies, there is a tendency for student wellbeing levels to decline across the years of schooling (Joing et al., 2020). To enhance capacity of schools to foster and maintain student wellbeing, consideration should be given to how the spaces within the school that students occupy may contribute to this goal. While relatively little is known about the role that school libraries may play as wellbeing supportive, safe and enjoyable spaces in contemporary schools (Merga, 2020a), school libraries can be spaces that can offer safety and comfort for students (Willis et al., 2019). Safe spaces are places where students feel secure (Butler et al., 2017), and it has been contended that “in many schools, the library is the only public space intentionally put forward as a refuge” (Wittmann & Fisher-Allison, 2020, p. 46). Willis et al. (2019) found that students drew on themes of connectedness and peacefulness when describing their ideal school libraries; connectedness was related to both physical and emotional wellbeing, and peacefulness was linked to a student desire for spaces in which to recharge, relax and escape into quiet and safe spaces.

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While libraries can act as valued safe spaces for young and vulnerable people, the focus of the current research has typically been on public libraries (e.g. Productivity Commission, 2019; Wexelbaum, 2016). Despite a wealth of anecdotal evidence around school libraries as safe spaces, research is needed to illustrate how school libraries in particular can operate as safe spaces for young people, providing practical examples from contemporary school libraries that can be used to inform schools seeking to enhance their library's capacity to function in this regard. First, more needs to be learned about how students use the library during class time, but also how they choose to use it when choice of activity is available to them. Given that for many students, class time in the library can be somewhat limited, particularly as students move through the years of schooling (Merga, 2019a; Merga & Mat Roni, 2017a), this can begin to provide some insights into what the library provides for students at an activity level. Additionally, information is needed on why students who enjoy the library gravitate toward it. At present, an avid student user may be imagined as an avid reader or "bookish" student, but as the affordances of libraries have greatly expanded in recent times to include diverse new facets such as makerspaces (Lee et al., 2017), it is likely that the appeal of the library may encompass a broader range of clientele. Finally, uses for and appreciation of the library by avid student users needs to be related to student wellbeing, to shed insights into how students may potentially draw on unique affordances of the library to meet their emotional and health needs. Given the precarious position that many school libraries currently face in terms of both staffing and funding (e.g. Kachel, 2015), and the aforementioned challenges facing young people's wellbeing in current times, it is imperative that exploratory work be done in this space so that the potential of the school library as a facilitator or conduit of student wellbeing be considered.

This article reports on data from the 2020 *School libraries promoting wellbeing* project, which adopted an exploratory qualitative approach, involving semi-structured interviews with library managers and students at three schools. It sought to discover how school libraries may provide safe and enjoyable spaces, provide resources on health and wellbeing, and enable reading for pleasure. This article primarily focusses on the data relating to the first of these three objectives. It addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the library use patterns of avid student users?
2. Why do avid student users make use of the library, and how does this relate to the library as a safe space?

Method

Participants

Participants in the study were library managers and middle-years students (Years 4–9) at three Western Australian schools. The focus on middle-years students was for a number of reasons. First, their communicative competence was thought to be sufficient to ensure active participation, with self-report more reliable with these students than those in younger years (e.g. Fraillon, 2005). In addition, middle-years students may be particularly susceptible to wellbeing and mental health concerns, with age of onset for many mental health disorders reported from 12 years of age (Dray et al., 2017), and

middle-years students may have greater wellbeing needs as students move into the challenges of adolescence. Library managers (LMs) were selected as key respondents, as based on previous research of the team (e.g. Merga, 2019b), it was felt that LMs would be well-situated to comment on the workings of the library, and specifically, the role of the library in fostering student wellbeing.

The LM and four students participated at each of the three schools. Principal's consent was obtained in order for schools to participate. Recruitment primarily involved reaching out through the Australian School Library Association (ASLA) to prospective participants through the ASLA email list. As minors, students provided both informed individual and parental consent in order to participate in the study to adhere to institutional ethics requirements, and LMs provided both individual and their Principal's consent for their participation. Care has been taken to present the data provided by these participants to ensure that participants and their schools will not be identified via deductive disclosure (Kaiser, 2009). Pseudonyms were selected by the respondents themselves, so that they could find their voice in any subsequent publications.

Tools

Data were collected through two semi-structured interview schedules, and an informal library space rubric also enabled collection of observational notes about uses of space in the libraries. Most of the responses cited within this article were in response to the following interview questions and related, tangential questions that were constructed in-situ due to the semi-structured nature of the tools.

Students

1. What is your favorite place to be in your school? Why?
2. Do you visit the library during class time?
 - If yes, please describe when (e.g. during a subject) and how often?
 - What do you do in the library during this time?
3. Do you visit the library outside class time?
 - If yes, please describe when (e.g. at lunch) and how often?
 - What do you do in the library during this time?
4. Do you like spending time in your school library?
 - If yes, why?
 - If no, why not?
5. A "safe place" is a place where you feel secure and where you can relax and be comfortable. Is your library a safe place?
 - If yes, why?
 - If no, why not?
6. Do you have a preferred place to sit in your library?
 - If yes, why do you like that spot?
7. What is the best thing about your library?

Library managers

1. If a “safe place” is a place where you feel secure and where you can relax and be comfortable, is your library a safe space for students? Why do you/don’t you think this?
 - If yes, is your library being a safe space intentional, or did this just happen? Please explain.
 - If no, are you taking any steps/measures to make your library a safe space for students? Please describe.
2. Have students provided past feedback to you around the library as a safe space? (This can be formal e.g. surveys or informal e.g. brief conversation).
 - If yes, what kinds of feedback have you received? Please describe.
3. In your view, what kinds of students gain the most benefit from the library being a safe space?

Sampling

The three schools that were purposefully sampled were self-identified exemplar schools. This meant that they perceived that they had strengths in at least two of the three criteria being explored: they operated as safe spaces for young people, promoted and resourced mental health and wellbeing initiatives, and/or supported and promoted reading for pleasure. These sampling constraints were necessary, as this project focused on what school libraries “can do,” highlighting their full potential, whereas subsequent generalizable research is planned that will not be purposefully skewed toward the positive, instead showing what school libraries “typically do.” The exemplar rationale was also communicated to LMs who selected the student participants, as they were told to select keen students who made use of the library, who could therefore be considered “avid user” students. It should also be noted that the COVID-19 pandemic and related school closures and suspension of research activities applied significant limitations to sampling by greatly limiting the availability of schools.

At each school, on-site interviews were conducted with four avid user students ($N=12$) as well as the library managers ($N=3$). All schools were co-educational and

Table 1. School and student descriptions.

School code	School and library manager description	Student description ($N=12$)
School A	Secondary school (Years 7–12), ICSEA ^a in 1000–1100 range. >1100 students. Library manager Jane .	Felix was a 13-year-old male in Year 8. Jennie was a 12-year-old female in Year 7. Kai was a 15-year-old female in Year 9. Lacey was a 13-year-old female in Year 8.
School B	Primary school (Years PP-6), ICSEA ^a in 1100–1200 range. >600 students. Library manager Anne .	Chris was a 10-year-old male in Year 5. Josh was an 11-year-old male in Year 6. Rose was a 9-year-old female in Year 4. Sophia was an 11-year-old female in Year 6.
School C	Combined primary and secondary school (Years PP-12), ICSEA ^a in 1000–1100 range. >1600 students. Library Manager Veronica worked in the primary school library, therefore all findings from this setting relate to the primary school library.	Bob was a 10-year-old male in Year 5 Momo was a 10-year-old female in Year 5 Piper was a 12-year-old female in Year 6. Skyla was a 10-year-old female in Year 5

^aAustralian schools are categorized using the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) (ACARA, 2015): “the lower the ICSEA value, the lower the level of educational advantage of students who go to this school” (p. 1), and the average is 1000.

located in the Perth metropolitan area. They were Independent (Private) or Catholic schools, and as per [Table 1](#), the sample is inclusive of library facilities for both primary and secondary schools. As aforementioned, descriptors in [Table 1](#) are purposefully limited to prevent deductive disclosure of schools and library managers. All genders in [Table 1](#) were nominated by respondents. All students spoke English as a first language and most were born in Australia, with the exception of one student who was born in a potentially identifying European country. Library manager descriptions were also intentionally sparse as their small number in Western Australian schools greatly increases the likelihood of identifiability. All data were collected in schools by the first author in 2020.

Analysis

Interview data were transcribed and then recurring thematic codes were identified by the researchers and refined using a process of constant comparative analysis (Boeije, 2002; Kolb, 2012), designed to support analyses that seek to generate theory and findings which are “integrated, consistent, plausible, close to the data” (Glaser, 1965, pp. 437–438). An abductive approach oriented the analysis, which “rests on the cultivation of anomalous and surprising empirical findings against a background of multiple existing sociological theories and through systematic methodological analysis” (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p. 169).

While the findings lack statistical-probabilistic generalizability (Smith, 2018), the rich detail attained constitutes essential foundation work in the under-researched area of school libraries’ potential contribution to student wellbeing. Quotes are presented in edited verbatim to enhance readability without changing meaning.

Results and discussion

Library use patterns of avid users

As explained in the methods, avid user students from the middle years of schooling were key respondent in the study. As per [Table 2](#), data were collected on the self-reported visitation patterns of these avid users.

As can be noted by [Table 2](#), these students had weekly or fortnightly access to the school library during class time for diverse purposes. Visitation outside class time was far more varied; avid use was not always associated with frequent use outside class time, with Chris loving his library but never visiting it outside class time. At the other extreme, Jennie was a daily visitor, often at multiple times during the day. While more research is needed on students’ library use patterns in class time and by choice, these data begin to reveal that while during class time avid library users may use the library borrowing, RfP, learning, research and exposure to literature, uses of the library directed by choice and the available affordances of the library were more diverse. As per [Table 2](#), students used the library for quiet socializing and game playing (traditional games such as card or board games), schoolwork, accessing technology, RfP and related borrowing, makerspace activities, seeking respite from unfavorable weather conditions, and drawing. While it cannot be contended that these findings hold broader generalizability

Table 2. Library visitation patterns of avid users.

Student	During class time	Class time activities	Outside class time	Outside class time activities
Felix	Weekly during subject English	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schoolwork • Reading for pleasure (RfP) • Borrowing* • Book talks with teacher librarian 	After school while waiting for parent pick-up. Sometimes at recess and lunch.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spend time with friends. • Homework and study. • Self-directed research. • YouTube
Jennie	Fortnightly during subject English	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schoolwork • Small amount of time given to RfP 	Daily visitor, before school and during recess and lunch.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look for books • Spend time on the computer
Kai	Fortnightly during subject English	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RfP • Book talks with teacher librarian • Borrowing • Research and study 	During recess and lunch, and when unable to participate in sports. Attends every day.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plays card games with friends • Reads nonfiction books for pleasure with friends • RfP if alone
Lacey	Weekly, alternating between once and twice a week during subject English	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schoolwork (activities) • Viewing videos about study techniques • Reading advocacy • RfP 	Two or three times per week and lunchtime.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Borrowing • Makerspace activities
Chris	Weekly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schoolwork • Borrowing books 	Never	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not applicable.
Josh	Weekly, though he notes he had more regular access during class time during earlier years of schooling.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Borrow books • RfP 	Some lunchtimes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Borrowing • RfP • Cools down. • Quiet chats with friends.
Rose	Weekly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research for schoolwork • RfP 	Regular lunchtime visitor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RfP • Play “quiet games”
Sophia	Weekly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction • RfP • “Sometimes we watch videos of people reading books on the smartboard” • Research • Borrowing • Borrowing 	Visits for 2 or 3 of the 4 days the library is open at lunchtime per week.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drawing • RfP • Card games with friends • Homework • Chat with friends
Bob	Mostly fortnightly, but sometimes weekly. Less often than in earlier years of schooling. Not only in English time.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Borrowing 	Around once every three weeks during lunchtime, but notes that “We do it a lot when it’s raining.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RfP • Games with friends such as Uno and Chess • Drawing silently
Momo	Weekly.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Borrowing • Learning about a specific topic (e.g. fiction/nonfiction; digital media) 	Visits “a couple of times a week” before school or during lunch.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RfP • Borrowing • Playing board games • Drawing
Piper	Weekly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Borrowing. • Learning about a specific topic (e.g. digital media) 	Visits three days a week	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RfP • Playing games • Drawing
Skyla	Weekly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Borrowing • Learning about digital media and library skills • RfP 	Once or twice a week during recess or lunch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RfP

*Includes returning books.

beyond this sample, they provide an important backdrop to the subsequent considerations of the school library as a safe space.

The school library as a safe space: Reasons for frequenting the school library

These avid users spoke highly of the space for numerous reasons, and it is important to note that all of the respondents identified their library as a safe space when asked. As there was considerable overlap between the responses given from students when asked about why they visited the library, and why they thought their library was a safe space, they are combined here. Many of the themes are closely interrelated and interwoven, but also have sufficient distinctive features to have emerged from the coding approach detailed in the methods as warranting independent consideration.

Belonging and sanctuary

The school library is a space where students may feel they belong, finding a good fit with the peers and activities in the space, and some described seeking sanctuary. Within the space, students might strategically locate themselves to optimize their sense of safety, with Bob explaining that “I like sitting there in the corner ... It’s just, like, a small space that I can fit right into and just do whatever I want there ... I usually read in there.” Similarly, Momo described making choices within the sanctuary based on her needs.

It’s a great place if you just want to chill out or if you’re having trouble at home or anything, you can just go into the library and sit by yourself and read a book or do some drawing or play a board game ... it’s very inviting and there’s multiple places where if you just need to sit and have some space, you can and if you don’t want to be running around outside, you can always just come in the library.

In some cases, students actively nominated the library as their “safe space” and it became part of their pastoral care planning. LM Veronica explained her role liaising with her school’s pastoral care coordinator.

Often, she’ll come to me and we’ll have a little meeting and say, “Look, this is the situation.” She said, “Obviously, you know this child, you’ve known them since they were very little. They’ve nominated library as one of their safe spaces. Is it okay if we try and work something out whereby they can come when they’re frustrated, or as a reward?” or, you know, for whatever they need that she will actually negotiate, and we’ll talk about, you know, what the purpose is for them coming and then how best to facilitate it.

Recent research has found that provision of safe and inclusive spaces and safeguarding “student welfare, pastoral care, health and safety” sit within the typical role of the UK school librarian (Merga, 2020c, p. 7), with Australian teacher librarians typically expected to “create and maintain a library learning environment that is friendly, well-ordered, welcoming, flexible, productive, vibrant, stimulating, inclusive, positive and safe” (Merga, 2020b, p. 895). As such, the role of staff in creation of a space that promotes belonging and sanctuary should not be overlooked.

A space supportive of books and reading can also foster a sense of belonging for students who identify as readers. For example, Sophie liked to visit the library due to “the books and the people explaining that “the types of people normally that come in here” were “all the really nerdish, just people who like sitting down and chatting and reading

and playing Uno.” Similarly, Kai explained that “I’ve just always liked being in the library. I think just who I am as a person correlates well with the environment that a library has to offer. Especially this one.” Sellers (2019) defines “a reading identity” as related to an individual’s “ways of reading, of being a reader, and the extent to which they view themselves as ‘someone who reads’” (p. 938), exploring the role that the peer group may play in this identity formation. With reading and being a reader influenced by an individual’s broader social influences, the affordance of reader-supportive spaces such as school libraries where students can connect with like-minded peers can be important to support the orientation of students who identify as readers.

Books and reading

Closely related to this theme of belonging and sanctuary, for some students, a favorite aspect of the library was the presence of books, and the opportunity to read. Enjoyment of reading originates in varied preferences and motivations (e.g. Merga, 2017a), and the respondents in this study reflected diverse pleasure from reading. Jennie explained that “I visit here every single day and get surrounded by books.” Given debates about whether physical books should be replaced by eBooks (Merga & Mat Roni, 2017b; Støle et al., 2020), this theme draws attention to the continued valuing of physical books as part of the school library resource by young people. The library was Chris’s favorite place in his school, as “I can have some time to read my books and enjoy the stories that I get given,” and the quality and affordances of books were discussed by Josh, who enjoyed reading to learn, explaining that

there’s such amazing books in this library that are so nice to ... some are nice to read, some that have amazing facts and just things that are a bit awkward. Like, there’s these books about snails and the way they grow up and it’s just weird how they do it. So yeah, it’s a really nice and funny place to hang out in.

Furthermore, an atmosphere that allowed reading was not necessarily widely available for students beyond the library, linking into the subsequent theme of quietude. Skyla noted that “the best thing about the library would be how warming and home-like it is; it’s very nice and quiet and you can just concentrate on reading.” When the interviewer then asked if she had access to many places where she can go to concentrate on reading, Skyla explained “not really, because the school is a very busy place, and at home, I’ve got a dog and she normally likes to play with me and stuff. So it’s kind of hard to be able to read at home, too.” This opportunity for focused and uninterrupted reading was a source of appeal; previous research has found that for some students, the school is the only place where they have time and space for reading (Merga, 2013), and the role of the library as a reading-supportive space should not be taken for granted so that it can reflect the reading objectives of the school (Loh, 2015).

Relaxing and recharging

As well as finding sanctuary and belonging, the library facilitates relaxation and recharging. For example, Jennie described going on the computer in the library “just to make me feel good about myself before the day ahead.” She explained that this helped “by bringing positive energy from people on social media that personally I like to listen to

as well, and it just makes me feel good about myself since I'm listening to something positive to help me get through the day, instead of being all moody."

In a number of cases relaxing and recharging was also related to the ambient environment and furnishings of the library, with Lacey explaining that "it's just got a really lovely environment, in particular I love the comfy chairs, it's got a really nice atmosphere," and Rose noting that "I normally like being in the library because it is just really comforting because especially on hot days, you can just go and it's nice and air conditioned and you can just grab a book and read it." LM Anne was purposeful in her creation of this atmosphere, noting that

it relaxes them, I think. They walk through the door, the temperature is right, depending on whether it's hot or cold. There are, you know, places to lie down, there are cushions to lie on, there's a relaxed feel. There's no expectation, apart from being courteous, and being aware of those around you. So basically, they don't have to do anything. You know, if they want to lie on the floor and just talk quietly to the person next to them or sit in a huddle, or, you know, I have a number of kids who say, "Can I please shelve books? Can I come in and shelve books?," you know, if that's what they feel gives them relief, then I think we're doing a good job.

Even when noise level became elevated, this did not necessarily impair quiet enjoyment, with Piper explaining that "there's just so much you can do and it's really relaxing and even if it does sometimes get really loud, you kind of don't notice it, because you're, like, in your own space when you're in the library."

Part of the relaxed environment also related to the library being a space where the classroom rules could be relaxed to allow students to enjoy their time, and a study of secondary students in the US found that amongst other recommendations, they wanted their libraries to have "fewer rules" and "better atmosphere" (Clabo, 2002, p. 83). For example, Kai explained that the "best thing about the library last term was the movies after school, or during lunch. So they'll say, 'Bring in ... you can bring your lunch in if you want,' and we just sit there, have movies, and then as soon as the bell goes, 'Alright guys, we'll resume it next week'." Being able to bend the rules by eating in the library to enjoy relaxing in the library space further fostered the impression that the library was a space where student wellbeing was a priority that outstripped conventions.

LM Veronica understood this, and she also saw the library as a space in which the pressures of schooling may not apply.

I think it can be very hard for young people when they're transitioning from a child into an adult, into a young adult anyway. And the library is kind of a less formal, maybe less judgmental place than a classroom. Not that the teachers are judgmental, but we do tests and we do all these things in the classroom that are not overt, but they are judgmental, it's judgey, it's ranking, and it's doing all those things and the library doesn't do that.

As noted by Polesel et al. (2012), there is considerable evidence in international literature on "the negative impact of high stakes testing on students' well-being," including "stress, anxiety, pressure and fear experienced by students" (p. 4). Furthermore, increasingly research suggests that high stakes exams "have a significant impact on young people's emotional well-being and that such exams have the power to cause stress independent of personal disposition" (Banks & Smyth, 2015, p. 598), suggesting that all students could benefit from school library spaces that facilitate relaxing and recharging to counter-balance these stressors.

Staff

Students identified the library staff as a key factor in their enjoyment of, and safety in the library. This was a compelling finding, as while there is a growing body of research on school and teacher librarians' perceptions of their contribution in education contexts, there is very little research from student perspectives. Library staff were felt to be particularly inclined to engage with students and listen to their concerns, with Piper explaining that

if we're feeling down, we can talk to our librarian ... even if it's, like, not for advice, she'll just listen to us and she'll tell us, if we want, she'll tell us advice or we can just have a bit of a rant to her. She's very nice.

This informal pastoral role is also one of the reasons that the library was Kai's favorite place, due to the "friendly staff." She explained that in the library, "teachers are a lot more interactive with you," also noting that "they genuinely care for you, and everyone here just has mutual respect, and, like, if you're having a bad day, they'll give you, like, a chocolate or something. It's just they're good people."

Even where students were not necessarily closely interacting with library staff, their mere presence was enough to contribute to a sense of safety and support for students. Felix explained that

There are teachers here all the time, and then at recess and lunch, they have teachers on duty, and before and after school as well, I think You've always got teachers around you, caring for you, looking after you, and when it's time to go they tell you, and it's kind of fun.

Similarly, Bob described a continuity of support from librarians. As he moved through his schooling years and his classroom teachers changed, the librarians remained accessible to him. He noted "I can always feel safe there and wanted there, because I know all the people since kindergarten, and some of the librarians have gone, but I still know the new ones well, and it's just very nice, very peaceful."

UK school librarians are likely to have a role in provision of "pastoral support, including as a pastoral tutor or student mentor" (Merga, 2020c, p. 7), and Australian teacher librarians similarly perform pastoral care roles (Merga, 2020b). However, this important pastoral role was not necessarily recognized by the leadership of LMs. LM Anne explained that her school leadership team were not aware of what she and her staff do to support student wellbeing, noting that "apart from me telling them constantly or showing them what we do, I don't think they're really aware of what actually happens. You get the teachers who go, 'That's fantastic, thank you very much.' And they're probably our greatest advocates." She concluded that "it would be nice to have more time to discuss it with leadership to say, 'Are you aware, and can you help us make this even better?'"

Furnishings

The furnishings in the library played a role in promoting a safe and secure environment for students. For example, Felix had a chair that was one of his favorites; it was shaped like an egg. He explained that "it's just comfortable, and you get to shut yourself out and just read your book there without anybody going, 'Hey, what book are you

reading?’.” He compared these furnishings with what was available at his former school, noting that at “my primary school, the library was pretty small and they had, like, nothing, apart from out the back there was, like, those plastic chairs and just desktop computers.” He also had another favorite chair that facilitated socializing with his friends in the library space. Similarly, Lacey explained that

I particularly love over by the romance section, these black egg chairs, because they’ve got these massive pillows in them, and I just think they’re really soft. It’s difficult to describe, but I think it just kind of gives you ... I’m not sure if it’s just me psychologically, it’s protection, even though there’s nothing at all that really protects you, but that’s how I would describe it.

Students also described having a favorite mat to sit on and diverse others preferred furnishings that facilitated relaxation, but also quiet socializing.

LMs kept across which types of furnishings were enjoyed by the students, with LM Jane explaining that “they love the ball chairs. That’s probably why we bought the egg chairs a couple of years ago, so they were added to the ball chairs. They also really love the wobble stools.” Similarly, LM Veronica described adjusting the furniture and its arrangement to optimize student comfort and safety.

We do have little corners and little bits, like, the space is set up a little bit for children to be able to remove themselves. I changed the furniture around, so we’ve got stool options and beanbag options and normal chair options and floor and other desks. So, if they don’t feel comfortable working in one space, they can work in another. And then so what that means is that if a child comes in for whatever reason, they’ve can find a space and they’ve got some privacy.

Furnishings can influence student learning by enhancing the learning environment (Imms et al., 2020) to meet both wellbeing and learning needs, and students appreciate choice and comfort (Morris & Imms, 2020). The students in this study appreciated choice and had favorite furnishings that related to comfort and security.

Decorations

Students contributed to the space, with Kai explaining that “a lot of the decorations here are either made in the arts department and the students are like, ‘Oh yeah, sure, you can display that,’ or we make them in Maker Space” which was located in the library. Thus students might make the decorations for the library inside the library itself. Furthermore, the process of making decorations with peers was a valued social activity; while this was being done, as noted by Kai, students “talk about random stuff” and interact. LM Anne described the students’ ownership of their contributions of decorations to the library space which were created and displayed in the library and entered in a competition.

One of the stipulations for that was, because it is a digital competition where you literally can just send it in without any paper being printed, but we wanted to showcase it to the families, they were only allowed to print one copy. So, they had to make sure that they had everything ... that that was going to go up whether it had mistakes or not. So that was an interesting exercise They’re very proud of it.

In this way, students had physical ownership over the library space, as they made a valued contribution to its decoration, with decorations influencing students' sense of comfort and security within the learning space (Bucholz & Sheffler, 2009).

Decorations could also provide comfort. For example, Josh's favorite place to sit in his library is near a giant stuffed toy. He explained that "if I were to read in the library one time without the class at lunch, I'll probably sit there because it's comfortable. And it looks like it's always happy all the time which makes me feel a bit happy." Sophia also described "sitting, or sometimes kind of lying, on the Ottomans and sitting with the (giant stuffed toy) whose name I have forgotten. He's comfy."

Rose described decorations as a source of amusement and entertainment. She noted that

There's lots of stuff around the library, and if you're just feeling not in the mood for reading, you can just look at it. There's stuff on the walls, and it's really cool.... Like, there's posters of books, there's characters in books, there's our national flag. There's people's and the books' anniversaries, and lots of really cool pictures.

As such, decorations could contribute to enjoyment as well as ambience within the library space.

A lively and social space

In relation to public libraries, Given and Leckie (2003) contend that "like malls, restaurants, and many other social settings, the library provides a public space in which individuals may engage in a range of social and informational activities" (p. 365), and Felix described his school library as "a very lively space" (Felix). Libraries were able to accommodate diverse student dispositions and activities, with Josh explaining that "it's really nice to obviously relax, but it's also nice just to have chats with friends in here, a quiet chat about how school's going, and what their favorite book is, and to have a good time." As such, the library could allow formal and informal social interactions and activities as well as individual quiet time.

In addition, some of the social activities that take place in the school library may be quite unique to the space. For example, Kai described reading for pleasure with friends.

Well, literally we were just doing then, the three of us, we found an Australian mammals book, so we pretty much just get a bunch of chairs, put them really close together, sit them on our laps, and then just flick through the pages, either read some of the words or look at the pictures, and if one of them interests us, then we read the page. And then we just laugh about, certain things and point out stuff and just enjoy ourselves while reading a book... Oh my God, we were looking at the bats at the end and some of them were terrifying and the others are adorable, and you're just like, "Aww..." Like, the ghost bats. And then the leaf bats as well.

Reading can be viewed as a social practice (Cremin & Swann, 2017), and these students fit Gambrell's (2011) construction of engaged readers, who are "intrinsically motivated to read for a variety of personal goals, strategic in their reading behaviors, knowledgeable in their construction of new understandings from text, and socially interactive about the reading of text" (p. 173). In this instance, high school aged students are reading the same, single copy of a book together for social enjoyment, and to discuss as they read.

LM Jane explained that as a social space, the library can play a unique role, noting that some of the activities organized for students

are intentionally set up so that students who would feel safe and those who are at a bit of a loose end would come, and also so the odd-bods, if you like, students who are loners can join in an activity without it being obvious, and they're communicating with others.

Similarly, the library can provide a context where disconnected students can begin to connect with their peers in a non-threatening environment. LM Veronica described observing a student

who visits my library about eight times a day and swaps his books at least once a day. He comes from a very, very poor household with a lot of children, a lot of change, and he just likes the fact that he can come in and get a new book and then you can read the new book, and he can walk around. He's a very lonely and solitary child. But the other day, I saw one of the smaller kids notice that he was on his own, feeling a bit sad, and he took a chessboard over to go and play with him. And so ... I know, I did nearly cry then I think the library provides positive interactions, positive social interactions for children who might struggle with making friendships and socialisation in the wider ... the playground's scary for kids, and sometimes a small amount of space with a familiar and safe environment allows them to just make friends gently.

Shy, withdrawn or introverted students may struggle with “often-crowded, high-stimulation” environments, making “the modern classroom is the quiet student's worst nightmare” (Condon & Ruth-Sahd, 2013, p. 507); even at its most lively, it is likely that the library space would typically be an environment more conducive to quieter, more tentative social exchanges that may be very valuable for these students.

Quietude

One of the many challenges of the library is that it seeks to deliver a diversity of environments and experiences to meet the diverse needs and expectations of its student clientele. This challenge is not unique to the school library context (Layton & Love, 2021), and research suggests that individuals' preferred reading environments may vary, with a study of avid readers finding that while 31.2% of respondents preferred to read in a quiet location, 32.5% could tolerate moderate background noise, and 28.5% could read anywhere, even in noisy contexts (Merga, 2017b). As noted by LM Jane, “there's lots of different perspectives or aspects to a library,” and as previously explored, the library can be a lively and social space, however it also needs to enable quietude for those users who need quiet in order to focus on their reading and relaxation.

Amongst the competing roles of the contemporary school library, allowing quietude retains currency, as findings suggest that quietude was valued by many of these young avid patrons. Lacey explained that her library is “a safe space to just calm down. And there's just places where you can do silent reading, or study.” Josh explained how the library enabled him to find balance as a self-identified “sporty kid” who enjoys physical activity, and he talks about the balance between activity and rest:

obviously, me being a sporty kid I love just going around about things and playing, and sport's been my thing since I was young. So, library and sport are mainly my things. So,

chillax time [in the library], and then just going out there is just really nice. Having some fresh air on the oval is really nice as well.

For Rose, the quiet enabled her to draw her attention inward, as she noted that “it’s really nice, because it’s really quiet in there, even, like, when you go outside, there’s lots of noise, but when you go in there, it’s just nice and quiet and peaceful,” and this meant that for Rose, “instead of, like, being really distracted by everybody else, you can just focus on yourself.” Chris also appreciated the opportunity for quiet removal from peers, noting that in the library time, “there’s no one to annoy me ... They’re too busy stuck reading a book.” For Sophia,

It’s always really nice and normally pretty quiet in here ... And, like, nothing crazy ever happens, which makes me feel like this is a secure space where it doesn’t change ridiculously rapidly. So, you won’t be sitting reading a book one second, and then playing basketball in the library the next, which is often what happens in the playground.

In Sophia’s case, the quietude was related to the reliability of the space, and it supported a sense of security.

Provision of quietude was intentional, and LM Anne described the need to be very sensitive to students’ need for quietude. She explained that she actively preserved a quiet environment in the library, asking any “loud and raucous” students to “be respectful of the fact that not everybody needs that fast pace, loud, boisterous interaction, and this is the place for those who are quiet and introverted and just need a bit of peace.”

And it’s interesting, that I see that there is a lot of discussion about changing the library space away from that. But I firmly believe that those children who have levels of anxiety or stress or are just quiet children have limited places to go within the school. And I think when they’re trying to recharge their batteries, you know, in the middle of the day, they need to have that. That needs to be respected and appreciated and provided for.

What these findings suggest is that quietude is not just appreciated for its capacity to facilitate reading. Students can also crave it to provide respite from energetic peers, and experience calm. It was interesting to note that students such as Josh were purposefully self-regulating and using the library to balance their own energy expenditure during the day. With quietude clearly valued by some students, as also noted by others (e.g. Willis et al., 2019), it will be an ongoing challenge for school library staff to allow the library to function as both a lively and social space, and an environment in which quietude is possible.

Conclusion

This article makes visible the valuable contribution of school libraries to student well-being, an important goal as the existence of school libraries and their staff is contingent on broader understanding of what they have to offer students (Tilke & Barrett, 2021). School libraries can be highly valued safe spaces for avid users in the middle years of schooling, and they may be valued for their capacity to foster belonging and sanctuary, allow exposure to books and opportunities for reading, and provide a space for relaxing and recharging. There was recognition of the role of their supportive staff, whose contribution to student pastoral care may not be fully recognized by school leadership. Library staff created inviting and supportive environments with careful selection of

furnishings and decorations, and the school libraries in this study sought to cater for highly diverse purposes, supporting both lively and social activities as well as quietude.

Further research should explore the extent to which the practices and affordances that recurred in these qualitative data hold broader generalizability. Research should also capture data on resourcing in school libraries, as the libraries in these studies were average/above average in terms of socio-economic advantage (see Table 1), and therefore it cannot be assumed that the material resourcing aspects such as furnishings and decorations may be used to the same effect in schools with limited budgets for such features. With growing attention on the role of schools as wellbeing supportive spaces, research needs to inform advocacy to ensure that school libraries can be safe and supportive sanctuaries in all schools.

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